

To: CN=Kate Fay/OU=R8/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA;CN=Martin Hestmark/OU=R8/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA[]; N=Martin Hestmark/OU=R8/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA[]
Cc: []
From: CN=Howard Cantor/OU=R8/O=USEPA/C=US
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Howard Cantor,
Deputy Regional Administrator
Region 8
US Environmental Protection Agency
Phone: (303) 312-6308
Fax: (303) 312-6882

Pavillion residents, gas operator need answers

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

The Environmental Protection Agency has managed to unite both a natural gas field operator near Pavillion and area landowners, who have been involved in a lengthy dispute about the company's role in alleged groundwater contamination.

This isn't a good thing. What the two parties have managed to agree upon is that they're both completely fed up with the EPA delaying its investigation of the hydraulic fracturing process, also known as "fracking."

And no one can blame either side for its frustration. One way or another, the fracking issue at Pavillion should have been settled long ago.

But the federal agency recently announced it is extending — for the third time — its public comment period on the controversial recovery method.

The EPA's draft report, which implicated drilling and specifically fracking as the cause of contamination in test wells, was issued in December 2011. There was an immediate, explosive reaction on both sides.

Fracking opponents viewed the report as the smoking gun they've been searching for to prove that the production technique contaminates groundwater. Water, sand and chemicals are pumped into a well to fracture rock and free trapped oil and gas.

But the operator, Encana Oil and Gas, and state officials characterized the agency's work as shoddy and incomplete. That's how we viewed the draft report, too.

The EPA's first public comment period on its investigation opened in December 2011. In early 2012, the agency agreed to additional tests in the area by the U.S. Geological Survey, and extended the comment period until October 2012. When that deadline approached, the EPA extended it until Jan. 15.

Earlier this month, the new deadline was extended until Sept. 30. The EPA tried to put a good spin on its announcement by saying the extension will give interested parties more time to comment on the work that's already been done, plus allow the agency to post additional material for review and even add more to its investigation.

No one in Pavillion is buying that waiting until September is positive, and neither do we.

"There's no credible reason to extend this," said Doug Hock, Encana's public relations officer. "We feel

it's a disservice to us, but more importantly to the people of Pavillion and the state of Wyoming."

He's absolutely right. John Fenton, a local landowner and chairman of Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens, noted, "This isn't good, for us especially. We're just going to be exposed to all this [contamination] that much longer and we still don't have any answers."

In 2010, the EPA began studying fracking in the natural gas field after several residents charged that the development had polluted their groundwater.

Obviously, we want the federal government to get things right about this important issue, which stands to affect not only fracking operations in Wyoming but in other states as well. But it shouldn't take three years to drill monitoring wells, study the data and come to valid, scientific conclusions.

Instead of final results, all new testing seems to have accomplished is to entrench the parties in their positions on fracking. Last summer's USGS tests provided new data, and the EPA claimed the new results were consistent with their own.

But Encana said the new data supported the company's original position that the EPA was wrong. Encana wants the agency to throw out its test results from both wells, but the EPA hasn't directly responded to the company's request.

We hope this is the final extension, but after three have already been granted by the feds, nothing would surprise us. It's clear that Pavillion residents, Encana and the state of Wyoming all deserve answers, but unfortunately, in this case, the EPA's incompetence has ruled the day.